



1

DEAD IN SIN

Ephesians 2:1–3

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.

—Ephesians 2:1–3

*T*he apostle Paul first came to Ephesus toward the end of his second missionary journey. Having traversed the northern part of today's western Turkey, he caught ship for the Macedonian city of Philippi. After bringing the gospel to Philippi, Paul moved southward through Greece, on

D E A D I N S I N

an epic evangelizing mission that founded the churches in Thessalonica, Berea, Athens, and Corinth. One result of this itinerary was that Paul bypassed the great and cosmopolitan city of Ephesus, the regional center of the Roman province of Asia (western Turkey).

For this reason, the first notable evangelist in Ephesus was not Paul, but the eloquent Alexandrian, Apollos. It is hard to say who started the Ephesian church because when Apollos began his preaching there, disciples such as Priscilla and Aquila, who were fleeing from the first Roman persecution of Christians, were already there. Apollos was bold and persuasive as he preached in the synagogues of Ephesus. But his grasp of the gospel was incomplete. Luke records that “he knew only the baptism of John” (Acts 18:25), which suggests an unbalanced emphasis on repentance from sin over faith in the finished work of Christ. Priscilla and Aquila helped Apollos to understand the gospel more accurately, and arranged for him to cross over to Greece, to help the believers there in their apologetic struggle with the anti-Christian Jews (Acts 18:26–28).

Apollos’s arrival in Greece coincided with Paul’s departure from Greece for Ephesus. Apparently unaware of Apollos’s ministry, Paul met professing Christian believers. He asked them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?” (Acts 19:2). This referred to the Pentecostal experience that occurred whenever the apostolic gospel first penetrated a new people. When the Ephesians replied that they had not received the Holy Spirit, Paul picked up the gospel where Apollos had left off, moving forward from John the Baptist’s call to prepare for the coming of God’s kingdom to the arrival of the kingdom of God in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. When the Ephesians believed, Paul baptized them in the name of Christ. Then “the Holy Spirit came on them, and they began speaking in tongues and prophesying” (Acts 19:6).

D E A D I N S I N

Thus, from the very start of Paul's ministry in Ephesus, the apostle was concerned for the accuracy of the gospel message of salvation. Remaining in that strategic center for two years, Paul devoted himself not so much to Jewish apologetics, but to the sound instruction of the church in the doctrines of the gospel and the evangelizing of the city through the preaching of God's Word. From his pulpit in the hall of Tyrannus, Paul spoke daily, "so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks" (Acts 19:10).

Perhaps it was because of his initial experience in Ephesus—not to mention the strategic importance of the city to the early church—that Paul's letter to the Ephesians delivers such a clear, coherent, and comprehensive exposition of the Christian doctrine of salvation. Having begun this letter, considered by many to be the crown of all Paul's writings, with a doctrinally rich hymn of praise to God's glory in chapter 1, Paul lays out the heart of his message in chapter 2: the apostolic message of salvation. Klyne Snodgrass describes this chapter as "one of the clearest, most expressive, and most loved descriptions of salvation in the New Testament."¹

WHAT IS SIN?

We always want to be careful to begin our understanding of biblical doctrines where the Bible itself begins. This is especially important in this chapter, in which Paul wants us first to know what we have been saved from, and what kind of people we were when God came to us with his saving grace. Paul begins:

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit

D E A D I N S I N

that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. (Eph. 2:1–3)

The apostle’s purpose is to show us the spiritual condition of everyone apart from Christ, and especially to show that God’s work of redemption begins with a recognition of our complete sinfulness.

When we begin to talk about sin, it is important that we have a biblical understanding of what sin is. Paul supplies this understanding by using two words that together summarize the Bible’s teaching on sin. Paul says that we were dead in “trespasses and sins.” The first of these terms, “trespasses” (Greek, *paraptōmasin*), indicates deviating from the right course, crossing a boundary, or breaking a command. This expresses our rebellion against God’s rule. God has said, “You shall not,” but we have. God has said, “You shall,” but we have not. All of us are guilty of trespasses, for we have not kept God’s law perfectly.

The second word, translated here simply as “sins” (Greek, *hamartiais*), means “falling short of the mark.” It is used of an arrow that lands short of the target. It means failing to meet the required standard—in this case, God’s perfect standard of holiness. In Romans 3:23, Paul says that this applies to all of us: “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” We are not the people that God intended us to be.

S I N I S D E A T H

The Bible teaches that God made mankind good, without sin. Man’s fall into sin is chronicled in Genesis 3. In Genesis 2:17 God forbade Adam and Eve to eat from the tree of

D E A D I N S I N

the knowledge of good and evil, on pain of the punishment of death. When the devil tempted our first parents so that they broke this command and sinned for the first time, the curse of death fell upon our race. As Paul explains in Romans 5:12, “sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin.”

This raises a vital question to which our passage gives an important answer: Just how sinful are we apart from Jesus Christ? Exactly what effect has the fall into sin had on mankind?

There have historically been three views about man in his relationship to sin. The first is the view of liberal theology, otherwise known as *humanism*. According to this view, man, despite his occasional mistakes, is *well*. People are basically good, and left to themselves under normal circumstances, they can be expected to do good things. So far as the fall was concerned, it was a fall *upward*. By experimenting with good and evil, by not allowing God’s commands to hold him back, man is growing into his true divine potential.

The liberal rabbi Harold Kushner argues just this point in a recent book, stating that by breaking God’s commands in the garden of Eden, Adam and Eve expanded their horizons; this, Kushner is so bold to say, is what God was hoping our first parents would do. Kushner sees sin not as causing man’s expulsion from Paradise, but as “the story of the first human beings graduating” into a world of choices and liberation. “I don’t believe that eating from the Tree of Knowledge was sinful,” he writes, “[but] one of the bravest and most liberating events in the history of the human race.”²

According to the Bible, however, sin produced not liberation but separation from the holy rule of God to the cursed domination of Satan, and from the blessing of God’s favor to the curse and death that is the life of sin. Perhaps the greatest condemnation of Kushner and others who espouse the

D E A D I N S I N

liberal, upward view of the fall is their agreement with the serpent, who assured Adam and Eve that by sin, “you will not surely die,” but “your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God” (Gen. 3:4–5).

The second view, held by many evangelicals today, strongly contends with the liberal view by insisting that the fall was downward. But this view sees that having fallen into sin, man is merely *sick*. This is the view of *Arminianism*, so named for the sixteenth-century theologian Jacob Arminius. He insisted that while man has certainly been corrupted by sin, his fallen condition is not so bad as to render him incapable of cooperation in salvation. Often the analogy will be made of a man who is on his deathbed. He is so weak that he cannot get out of bed, so he needs the doctor to bring the medicine that will heal him. His hand may be so weak that he cannot even hold the spoon. Nonetheless, if he is going to take the medicine, he must, by his own power and will, open his mouth to receive the saving fluid. The medicine is God’s grace, without which the sick man cannot possibly be healed or even escape death. But he retains some small power, and he must exercise it if he is to be saved. Thus, the exercising of his free will is the key to his salvation.

The third view is that held by Reformed theology, also associated with the great ancient theologian Aurelius Augustine, and sometimes called *Calvinism*, for the Protestant Reformer John Calvin. This view says that man in sin certainly is not well. But neither is he merely sick. His condition is far worse than this: he is, as Paul reveals in verse 1, “dead in . . . trespasses and sins.” What fallen man needs is not medicine but a resurrection. His salvation depends, as Paul wrote in Romans 9:16, “not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy.”

This is the Bible’s teaching about men and women in sin. We are not well, not even sick, but spiritually dead. Paul does not mean that we lack biological life: we still walk and talk, eat,

D E A D I N S I N

drink, and work. But doing all this in the realm of sin, we are dead to the things of God.

We know someone is dead because he no longer responds to stimuli. We talk to him, but he does not answer. We touch him, and he does not move. This is the way in which people who are spiritually dead respond to God and his Word: they have no comprehension, even when the Bible is taught; when the gospel offer is made, they do not respond. Martyn Lloyd-Jones puts this truth in practical terms:

The man who is not a Christian finds the Bible very boring, and expositions of the Bible very boring. He does not find films boring, he does not find the newspapers boring, he does not find the novels boring; but he finds these things boring. He does not enjoy conversations about the soul and about life and death and heaven and God and the Lord Jesus Christ. He cannot help it, but he just sees nothing in it and he is not interested. He is interested in men and their appearance, and in what they have done and in what they have said; the world and its affairs appeal to him tremendously. The position is perfectly simple; these other things are spiritual, they are God's things, and that kind of man sees nothing in them. Why? Because he is "dead" and has no spiritual life.³

The famous nineteenth-century philosopher and father of utilitarianism, Jeremy Bentham, provides us with an illustration. When he died, he gave his great wealth to the University College Hospital of London—on one condition. His body was to be preserved, and at every meeting of the board of directors his corpse was to be dressed in a formal suit and seated at the boardroom table. He seems to have intended in this grisly way to remind them of his views and intellectual

D E A D I N S I N

legacy. To this day, Jeremy Bentham's body, now dead for more than 180 years, is wheeled out for board meetings. As he is brought in, the chairman says, "Jeremy Bentham, present but not voting."⁴

Bentham is there, but he can do nothing, he can contribute nothing, he can say nothing. He hears nothing that is said. Though present, he is dead. That is a vivid picture of how he lived with respect to the things of God, and what we all are like until we are brought to spiritual life by Christ's resurrection power.

"ALL"—"BY NATURE"

You may be thinking, "I can see how this applies to some people, but I doubt that it applies to most of us—and it certainly is not true of me!" But notice that Paul specifies in verse 2 that "we all" were like this. According to Paul, this is the universal condition of mankind apart from the saving grace of God. You may pass as respectable in the sight of men, but in the sight of God all have sinned, all have trespassed, and apart from Christ all are dead in sin.

In verse 3, Paul tells us why all are dead in sin: we were "by nature children of wrath," meaning that we deserve God's condemnation. But the key expression is that this is true of us *by our nature*. This is why we are all dead in trespasses: because since the fall, our whole beings are corrupted by sin. We are not sinners because we sin; we sin because we are by nature sinners.

When Adam and Eve disobeyed God, they did not immediately experience physical death, though ultimately they did die. More importantly, they died spiritually. This is shown by the fact that they ran from God in the garden and tried to cover their nakedness with fig leaves. As Augustine explained, the kind of death Adam experienced

D E A D I N S I N

was “God’s desertion of the soul.”⁵ He added, “The punishment for that sin . . . was, to put it in a single word, more disobedience.”⁶ Death entered into man’s nature as moral and spiritual corruption, so that Paul could write elsewhere of sinful people, “she . . . is dead even while she lives” (1 Tim. 5:6).

Our problem is that this condition has been passed on to us: this is what is meant by the doctrine of *original sin*. Original sin is not the first sin itself committed by Adam and Eve. It is the consequence of that sin as it has plunged our entire race into the corruption of depravity. It means that we are now born with natures inclined to evil. John Calvin explains, “For all of us tend to evil, and we are not only inclined to it, but we are, as it were, boiling hot with it.”⁷

This principle can be proved by the sinfulness of our children from the most tender age. King David said in Psalm 51:5, “Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me.” Anyone who has raised little children knows what he was talking about. J. C. Ryle, who loved children dearly, gives this realistic assessment:

The fairest babe, that has entered life this year and become the sunbeam of a family, is not, as its mother perhaps fondly calls it, a little “angel”, or a little “innocent”, but a little “sinner”. Alas! As it lies smiling and crowing in its cradle, that little creature carries in its heart the seeds of every kind of wickedness! Only watch it carefully, as it grows in stature and its mind develops, and . . . you will see in it the buds and germs of deceit, evil temper, selfishness, self-will, obstinacy, greediness, envy, jealousy, passion, which, if indulged and let alone, will shoot up with painful rapidity. Who taught the child these things? Where did he learn them?⁸

D E A D I N S I N

The answer is that he did not learn them—transgression and sin come naturally to our race without instruction. This is why training in righteousness is so hard, while children can learn the ways of sin at the first exposure. We are all “by nature children of wrath.”

This is the great and universal problem of all mankind. Our problem is not mere ignorance or lack of education; America has the most educated population of all time, but we have not graduated beyond the problem of sin. Our problem is not a bad environment, however bad our situation may in fact be; being by nature spiritually dead sinners, we are the ones who ruin every good environment. Our problem is not lack of money, so that it can be fixed by winning the lottery or by advancement at work; nor is it lack of technique, so that the right self-help advice will set us all straight. Our great problem is this, as John MacArthur explains: “Because [man] is dead to God, he is dead to spiritual life, truth, righteousness, inner peace and happiness, and ultimately to every other good thing.”⁹ The leopard cannot change its spots, and we cannot escape our guilty and corrupt nature, and so are hopeless unless we are saved by God.

S I N R E D U C E S U S T O C R A V I N G S

Paul continues in these verses to work out the implications of this spiritual deadness. What does it mean to be dead in sin? Paul tells us, in verse 3, that *sin reduces us to cravings*. Men and women were made in the image of God, to reflect his glory and partake of his holiness. But being dead in trespasses and sins, as Paul tells his Christian readers, “we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind” (Eph. 2:3).

Several key words are in play here, the first of which is translated “lived” (Greek, *anestrapēmen*) and really denotes a

D E A D I N S I N

lifestyle. Paul says that sinfulness is characterized by a certain way of life. The second key word is translated “passions” (Greek, *epithymiais*). This could also be rendered as “lusts.” Man in sin lives according to the lusts of his flesh, that is, his sinful nature.

Surely this is an apt description of our culture. The American lifestyle is driven by sinful cravings. We immediately think of the sensuality that dominates our society. Almost anything can be sold with an ad featuring a scantily clad woman. The pornography industry is booming as never before; by any estimate, a significant portion of Internet commerce today is driven by the sexual lusts of men. We add to this other cravings—the lust for money, for narcotic highs, for drunken stupors—and our society demonstrates perfectly how sin reduces men and women to animal cravings.

Paul adds that we are “carrying out the desires of the body and the mind.” Literally, this reads, “doing the will of the flesh and the mind.” By “mind,” Paul means our *thoughts*—in this case our evil thoughts. Secular people boast about their free will, and even many Christians insist that unbelievers have a free will. But Paul knows that their will is bound to their sinful nature and to their wicked thoughts. They have a will, but it is always governed by their desires. Later in Ephesians, Paul explains, “They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity” (4:18–19). This perfectly describes the morass into which America has sunk, just like the Roman world of Paul’s day.

The apostle James chronicled this downslide in James 4:1–2: “What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you?” he asks. “Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet

D E A D I N S I N

and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel.” If you merely buy into the covetousness of our consumer society, and especially if you drink from the entertainment trough of sensual sin, you are a vital part of this devastating reign of death. By sin, man, alienated from God, spiritually dead and enslaved, is reduced to the level of the beast, living in misery and perpetually unsatisfied desire.

SIN LEADS TO OUR ETERNAL DESTRUCTION

The last thing Paul tells us about mankind’s being dead in sin is that *sin leads to our eternal destruction*: we “were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind” (Eph. 2:3).

The Bible teaches clearly that God judges both sin and the sinner. People say that God hates the sin and loves the sinner. That is true, in that he offers salvation for sinners in Jesus Christ. But in the end, in the great day of God’s final judgment, it will not merely be sins but sinners who are cast into the fiery chasm of hell.

God’s holiness demands that his wrath be poured out on sin. He proved this at the cross, for even when it was his own perfect Son who bore our sins, God poured out the full furies of hell upon his soul. What will it be like, then, for those who bear their own sins into God’s judgment, not having them forgiven through the blood of Jesus Christ? Paul says elsewhere that in his return as Judge, Jesus will come “in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might” (2 Thess. 1:8–9).

J. I. Packer explains, “God’s wrath in the Bible is never the capricious, self-indulgent, irritable, morally ignoble thing that human anger so often is. It is, instead, a right and neces-

D E A D I N S I N

sary reaction to objective moral evil.”¹⁰ Therefore, to be dead in sins is ultimately to suffer eternal death—not annihilation, but eternal condemnation and judgment in the wrathful hands of a holy God.

JESUS CHRIST IS THE SOLUTION TO SIN

I have learned as a preacher that people do not like to hear about sin. Not much, anyway. But according to Paul, if we ignore or avoid the subject, we cannot understand the salvation that God offers us in Christ. Paul shows us that the only way to understand and receive salvation is to admit and confess our sin. The point of talking about sin is not to tear people down, but to enter them onto God’s saving path at his appointed place of entry. The Bible says, “Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up” (James 4:10 NKJV).

I can imagine going into a leper colony to preach, to find that people there don’t like to hear about leprosy all the time, or to preach to blind people who don’t want to always talk about blindness. Along those lines, I understand why sinners don’t want to hear about sin; they have to deal with it enough and could use something cheerier.

But what if you went into the leper colony having the cure to their disease? Wouldn’t it, then, be your duty to talk about it? So it is with sin in the church and in the Bible. It may seem good to have your mind relieved from the pain and anxiety of sin with some pulpit comedy or sentimental stories. But it is decisively better to have your sin conquered, overcome, and removed. That is why the Bible constantly talks about sin, why our worship must always bring us as sinners to the cross of Christ, and why faithful preaching does not shrink from pointing us to the problem of sin. You may go elsewhere to be entertained or to find an emotional lift.

D E A D I N S I N

But the church of Jesus Christ is about salvation, and salvation requires that we face the facts about sin.

Sin is the great problem of the world, for which man has no solution. But here is good news; here is the light that has dawned in the land of the shadow of death. Jesus Christ has conquered sin by dying on the cross as an offering for us, and he offers salvation to all who will come, confess their need, and believe on him. He offers life to the dead, freedom for those in bondage, and heaven for those bound for hell.

This is something not only for non-Christians but for believers in Christ to hear and remember. It was to Christians that Paul wrote this epistle. Christians need to hear about sin as a means of recalling the wonder of what God has done in our salvation and to make alive our love to God. If we want to realize the greatness of the salvation that God has given us by his grace, then we must realize the depths to which we had sunk and the helplessness from which he saved us in Christ. We preach sin not to beat people down, but as the first step to lifting them up with the saving grace of God.

The glory of Christianity is that we can not only feel better for a while, but be made better forever. Not only can we experience holy religious moments, but we can be holy in Christ. Not only can we escape for a time the thoughts about ours and others' sins and the pain of a dying, sinful, cursed world, but we can be cleansed of sin and made a part of the new and sinless resurrection world. We can be forgiven, be born again, and enter a new life; not one that is governed by sinful cravings but by a holy passion for God—a life that leads not to eternal destruction in shame but to everlasting life in glory.

How does this happen? It happens by coming as sinners to the Savior, Jesus Christ. First, this means confessing that you have been dead in trespasses, you have been reduced to crav-